

In a partnership, two plus two equals five. The ability to leverage another organization's assets to accomplish something your organization could not do alone makes partnership powerful. But it also poses challenges, not least of which is the change it brings to both organizations. Engaging in a long-term partnership while staying true to your vision and mission requires some serious internal preparation and reflection to ensure that your organization is ready to partner.

"Choosing a partner has everything to do with knowing your own goals," says **Julie Simpson**, Principal of Simpson Consulting. You need clarity about why you're considering partnership, what you can get from it that you couldn't get on your own, how you will define success, and what is needed for long-term sustainability.

To develop this clarity, it's useful to undertake an internal readiness audit—a list of questions that help you evaluate your readiness on a full range of parameters (a sample audit is available in the Guild's Resource Center).¹ "The audit is about truth telling," notes **John McCann**, President of Partners in Performance. "It's not a warm and fuzzy discussion, but a very honest appraisal of where the organization is in current reality." Don't limit the audit to two or three people, but make it an organization-wide process that includes staff, board, and artists. Having all these people involved is "very eye-opening," says McCann. If the audit isn't "informed by the larger organization, you're taking a shortcut that's not fair to the partner."

FORMULATE GOALS

The key question is, as Simpson puts it: "What is the big bold vision you think can only be accomplished through partnership? If you don't know what you're going for, you can't describe what success looks like, and it's hard to have a conversation with someone else about it." You need to know what, or who, you want to have an impact on. Simpson describes one organization that spent a year asking questions before settling on a very specific mission: supporting youth-led social change. They then knew exactly what impact they were looking for.

Setting aside time to reflect on long-term goals is essential, says **Sarah Johnson**, Director of the Weill Music Institute of Carnegie Hall in New York. "Without planning and reflection time, it is impossible to articulate a clear, shared vision, which makes it hard to bring people on board to support the work you do." At **Fleisher Art Memorial** in Philadelphia, the entire institution reviews its strategic plan every three years, says Director of Programs **Magda Martinez**. Her department also reviews its own plan, which is part of the overall strategic plan, every year. And in their personal annual reviews, staff reflect on how their work supports Fleisher's mission and plan.

To expand your sense of your potential, McCann suggests asking "the types of questions that create the largest space for possibilities"—never yes-or-no questions, but open-ended ones. As just one example, he might ask, "Tell me about the origins of the organization, and what the journey's been like since then."

Formulating goals also requires clarity regarding mission, vision and values. "If your mission, and how a partnership supports it, isn't clear to you, you may find yourself creating a program or partnership that your institution can't support long-term," cautions Martinez. For example, a central value for Fleisher is enabling people to have a true experience of the artistic process—which includes failing to achieve your vision and trying again. Keeping this value in mind prevents Fleisher from promising potential partners quick and easy artistic results over short periods of time.

“PARTNERSHIP REQUIRES A LOT OF COMMUNICATION, AND SO DOES THE INTERNAL WORK THAT LAYS THE GROUNDWORK FOR SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS.”

As you reflect on goals, mission, and values, think too about what is non-negotiable for your organization. In a true partnership, where decision-making is shared, knowing your non-negotiables is crucial. You always need to balance maintaining your vision with being flexible enough to let go of what isn't essential to it. "Know where your points of flexibility are, and where you cannot compromise," advises Johnson. "If your team has a shared understanding of mission, fundamental values, and long-term goals, that will serve you well as you look at partnership possibilities."

Clearly articulated goals are also important as the basis for evaluation. "If you are entering a partnership because you see it accomplishing XYZ," explains Martinez, "then you know what to document and what to evaluate" to find out whether you actually accomplished those things.

INVENTORY ASSETS

Conduct an inventory of your core institutional and programmatic assets. What do you have that you can parlay into working with other organizations? What benefits will your partner get from partnering with you? "Often challenges are used to avoid moving forward," Simpson notes, and this asset-based approach shows you what you already have to work with.

Take into account not just hard assets but also the human capital you've created, suggests McCann. Think about competencies people in your organization have, such as fundraising and financial management. "For example, a new program coordinator who has worked in many different fields gives you an opportunity to understand partnership through the lens of a variety of fields, not just the arts," he explains. Beyond individual skill sets, consider "reputation capital" built over time, such as strong, sustained relationships with funders or community organizations.

¹ Community Arts Education Resource Center (<http://resourcecenter.nationalguild.org>) in the Toolbox section under Partnerships, Template and Sample Documents

Knowing what your current assets are also shows you what you lack — what needs to be different internally in your organization in order to partner. “For example,” says Simpson, “you’ll need extra energy and staff time. Whose plate will such a task fall on?” Or, will you need to hire a new position? Develop volunteer capacity?

CLARIFY COMMUNICATIONS

“If you can’t communicate internally, if you’re not on the same page, you can’t partner effectively,” notes Simpson. Indeed, as Johnson says, “Partnership requires a lot of communication, and so does the internal work that lays the groundwork for successful partnerships. You need to have a lot of honest conversations, not be afraid to say the things you’re most worried about saying, and reach a shared understanding of what you’re trying to accomplish and how the partnership facilitates that.”

Within your organization, Johnson adds, you must “do the internal consensus-building work upfront so that you’re ready to partner.” That means getting both internal and external stakeholders on board, so all understand “what each organization’s goals are, how the partnership helps both reach their goals and have more impact than they could on their own. Sometimes people are stuck in a comfortable place that is completely unsustainable, like a view that ‘the way we’ve always done things’ should continue even though it clearly isn’t working. Ask questions that challenge them to think about the issue from one or two other points of view.” Moreover, because a true partnership develops over time, you don’t see results right away, and your stakeholders must understand this as well.

As a partnership evolves, you will go through different stages of internal readiness as more and more members of your staff need to understand your interactions with the other organization, explains Martinez. For example, a long-term partner asked if Fleisher would fire their ceramics in its kilns. This meant that a studio tech who did not know this partner would have to accommodate the request. “I now have to explain to him why we’re doing this. I need him to respect the reason why this party is making demands on what he sees as an internal resource.” After putting much time and effort into the partnership, you don’t want a staff person to feel put out by extra work or a partner to have an uncomfortable interaction with him. Repeated incidents like that can begin to “eat away at the relationship you’ve built.”

In a similar way, a partnership will change patterns of communication within your organization. Certain departments that previously did not interact may now need to talk to each other because the partnership has affected how they work.

ASK THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

“Take your hard-learned lessons and turn them into changed practices,” advises McCann. The military does an “After Action Review” (AAR) that asks four questions: What did we intend to achieve? What actually happened? What did we learn? How do we do it again, better? Neutral questions like these help you avoid guilt and defaulting to questions like “Whose fault is this?” Articulate the answers as a set of lessons that you use to make different choices in the future.

For example, what have you already learned from working outside your organization? Suppose you work with funders and have developed a pattern of advocating for more support. An AAR can help you avoid falling into a similar trap of seeking partnerships purely to get funding.

McCann also suggests another set of questions to ask as you move toward partnership: What is it we know that is important to consider? What is it we don’t know that could be good to know? If the answers to these two questions don’t satisfy you, ask: What *don’t* we know that we don’t know? Having to ask that third question tells you that getting the information you need will require finding sources beyond the people sitting around your table, who may have never done a partnership before.

To manage the process of reflection involved in creating its Municipal Connections program, Weill hired a facilitator to provide an objective viewpoint. That outside voice, Johnson says, was critical for developing the program. But this is not the only way to introduce difficult questions. You can also ask them yourself and encourage others to do the same. “Do what you can to establish a safe environment that encourages inquiry and aspiration, both of which require that there is room in the culture of the organization for people to ask these tough questions,” she advises.

For example, tension often arises between a partner that defines success as active participation in art-making by its participants, and one that defines success in terms of achieving a certain level of artistic quality. “This leads to various challenging questions,” Johnson says. “What are we trying to achieve here? What are the priorities among the various goals? How hard should we push on artistic quality, particularly with sensitive populations? Or: How do we invite people into artistic experiences that present risk as something positive, not negative?” Instead of approaching these questions through the old dichotomy of process versus product, she suggests, ask: “How do we achieve process and product?”

“The question you’re most nervous about asking is the one you have to ask,” Martinez concludes. “Once you ask yourself these difficult questions, you can talk to your board and feel secure that your staff — the executive director, the program manager — all say the same thing: why this particular partnership is worth staff time and financial resources.” And you can also “think creatively about how to sustain a partnership that’s not just about money, but worth something much larger.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Golden writes grants, reports, website content, and other copy for nonprofits, especially in the field of arts and education. She can be reached at stephanie@stephaniegolden.net